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THE SOURCE OF PLEASURE IN FAMILIAR PLAYS

BY O. W. FIRKINS

WHY do we enjoy old plays? Why do we watch with pleasure the dramatic presentation of stories of which the issue and the chief events are foreseen from the outset?

Mr. William Archer, in his interesting book, *Play-making: A Manual of Craftsmanship*, draws a sharp distinction between curiosity which pursues the unknown and dramatic interest which "survives when curiosity is dead." In support of this thesis, he alleges several indisputable facts. He says, in substance, that a familiar play is full of unfamiliar points, that structure—craftsmanship—is most appreciated in repetition, that known characters, even known jokes, have the privileges and welcome of old friends, that "our pleasure consists of a delicate blending of surprise with realized anticipation," that we are capable of a vicarious curiosity dependent on the fiction of ignorance. The acting is supposed to be merely competent, and the field is thus cleared for the analysis of other elements.

On these clearly sound if not clearly original points another man might have been content to rest his case, but Mr. Archer has an argument in reserve, an argument for which he claims much weight and a qualified originality. It is in thus leaving his intrenchments and taking the field that he exposes himself to attack, and it is no more than just to present his idea in his own lucid and supple English. He is speaking of the screen scene in "The School for Scandal."

"The greater part of our pleasure arises precisely from the fact that we know what Sir Peter and Charles do not know, or, in other words, that we have a clear vision of all the circumstances, relations, and implications of a certain conjuncture of affairs, in which two, at least, of the persons concerned are ignorantly and blindly moving toward issues of

which they do not dream. We are, in fact, in the position of superior intelligences contemplating, with miraculous clairvoyance, the stumblings and fumbings of poor blind mortals straying through the labyrinth of life. Our seat in the theater is like a throne on the Epicurean Olympus, whence we can view with perfect intelligence, but without participation or responsibility, the intricate reactions of human destiny."—Page 171.

An earlier utterance to the same purport is cited in a footnote (I quote in part only).

"Curiosity is the accidental relish of a single night, whereas the essential and abiding pleasure of the theater lies in foreknowledge. In relation to the characters in the drama, the audience are as gods looking before and after. Sitting in the theater we taste, for a moment, the glory of omniscience."—Pp. 171-2, note.

"The glory of omniscience" is a vivid phrase, and it is well perhaps to remind ourselves that, in the present context, omniscience means nothing more than the knowledge, at second hand, of possibly a dozen, possibly three or four dozen, facts bearing on a single fictitious transaction.

The theory appeals, at first sight, to our experience of human nature. The appetite and the credulity of vanity are enormous and indiscriminate; we derive pleasure from the smallest of our real superiorities, and likewise from the least plausible of those imaginary superiorities in which so many of our real inferiorities are comprised. But even our grounds or excuses for self-complacence have their limits, and I do not think that we plume ourselves in relation to our fellow-man except where we are entered in the same competitions, listed, in sporting parlance, for the same events. Thus I felicitate myself at the theater when I foresee an outcome or perceive a joke in advance of my fellow-auditors; this is natural enough, for we are all *ex officio* competitors in the race for enlightenment. Again, I love to see my superiority attested by the follies and fatuities of the laughing-stocks in comedy; I find in the drunkenness of Sir Toby Belch an embellishment of my own sobriety, in the ineptitudes of Sir Andrew Aguecheek an advertisement of my common sense. It is true that Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are, for anything I know, fictitious; but they purport to be copies of real originals, and Shakespeare, the actors, and myself are all in a conspiracy to pass them off as actualities. Viewed as such, they are in the same plane of opportunity with myself: they were free to follow their perverse instincts, or to take example by my temperance and wisdom.

The case is altered, however, when I pride myself on my superiority to Othello on the ground that I know his own story better than he does. How have I gained this superiority? I have seen the play, read the book, or been forewarned by some spectator or reader. Now in comparison with other persons who might have seen the play, read the book, or gossiped with their neighbors, and have proved derelict to all these opportunities (assuming knowledge of this kind to dignify its possessor), I am entitled no doubt to a genial self-complacency. But how is Othello himself to be brought within this category? The difficulty Othello must have had in reading or seeing or even discussing the play which bears his name is so manifest that, when I am asked to look down on him for his failure, even my vanity, which has never incurred the reproach of squeamishness, recoils from the crudity of the repast. In real life, indeed, a man who sees the whole of a situation of which others see only halves is justifiably elated; the others might have had the same wit or the same luck. But where knowledge is impossible, its absence ceases to be humiliating.

The principle may be stated thus: when a man compares himself with the effigies of men in imitative works of art, he gets no comfort out of superiorities arising solely out of his station as observer and their position as objects of regard. In a gallery of immovable statues a man never meditates gloatingly on his ownership of a pair of serviceable legs; before the silence of Titian's doges or Raphael's saints, he never exults in the activity of his larynx. The same thing applies to characters in history: a contemporary statesman—Mr. Asquith, for example—reading the biography of Lord Grey or Mr. Gladstone would not commend himself for superiorities of knowledge dependent solely on the elucidative influence of time; he would exult where he felt that he could have made better use of their data.

We not only revisit great plays with enthusiasm; we re-read great novels with delight. The *rationale* of these two facts must be almost identical, and Mr. Archer's explanation, if valid, should be capable of transference from the play to the novel. Now I must confess my personal inability to carry over the idea of godship from the theater to the book; I can, with some difficulty, pursuant to Mr. Archer's flattering suggestion, imagine myself a god in the theater; I can take my seat for a throne in the same spirit

in which Falstaff took his "joined stool" for a "state" and his leaden dagger for a golden scepter; and the presence of real people in a removed precinct in a phase of life unrelated to my own existence gives color to the sense of apotheosis. But my throne is, both literally and metaphorically, fastened to the floor of the theater; I cannot take it home with me and survey the characters in *Jane Eyre*, or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or *The Rise of Silas Lapham* from its dignified, if somewhat straitened, eminence. The visual and tangible supports for Mr. Archer's Olympian metaphor, the apparatus of godship, so to speak, are withdrawn; and I find myself unable to sustain the metaphor in the absence of these reinforcements. When narrative is substituted for presentation, when the performance becomes entirely and manifestly subjective, I find myself incapable of rejoicing in the fact that I know more of a certain subject than certain other people who are obviously mere figments in my own mind. Yet the review of a great novel revives the original emotion quite as successfully as the return to a great play.

The instances of foreknowledge adduced by Mr. Archer are worth citing. "When Othello comes on the scene, radiant and confident in Desdemona's love, our knowledge of the fate awaiting him makes him a hundred times more interesting than could any mere curiosity as to what was about to happen. It is our prevision of Nora's exit at the end of the last act that lends its dramatic poignancy to the beginning of the first." No apter illustrations of the sound doctrine that foresight may heighten interest could be adduced; but surely literature could be raked from one end to the other without finding an instance more adverse than that of Othello to the theory that the interest of foresight is based on the pride of knowledge. With slightly lessened emphasis the same thing might be reaffirmed of Nora Helmer. The interest is sympathetic, not personal; and the knowledge humbles rather than exalts. Does the group outside the window in Maeterlinck's "*Intérieur*"—no bad symbols, by the way, of the forewarned audience in tragedy, in its sympathetic consciousness of the death of the girl of which no one as yet has ventured to apprise the peaceful family—does that group solace itself with the thought of its command of the situation?

Mr. Archer's Olympian theory is seen to be highly ques-

tionable, but the validity of his earlier arguments remains unaffected by the doubts that arise as to his supplementary hypothesis. Will not those earlier arguments suffice to explain the great and real pleasure we take in the revival of good plays? First of all, let us not exaggerate the stringencies of the problem. That a source of vivid and interesting emotion should be capable of eliciting vivid and interesting emotion on a second trial is no astonishing or anomalous fact; on the contrary, it is almost the rule. We do not drop a pear after the first mouthful, nor a jasmine after the first whiff; we swim or skate long after the novelty has vanished: we pace many times along a sea-beach or through a portico; we visit more than once a cataract or a campanile; we find yearly pleasure in what Lowell called "the familiar novelty" of spring, "none the less novel, when it arrives, because it is familiar." Why should moving sections of human life be less qualified than other things to please and stir us in the absence of curiosity? In point of fact, in our living individual experience, the review of past excitements, where curiosity in its primitive form is impossible, ranks high among the recreations and solaces of life.

A knowledge of the outcome is less inhibitory than people fancy. The news of a disaster or stroke of good-fortune often reaches us by the following gradations: a telegram, a letter, a personal colloquy. Does the telegram remove our wish to see the letter? Does the letter extinguish our desire for the interview? Why does a newspaper, so palpably and palpitantly anxious to cater to the suspense of its great infant, the public, never hesitate to let out its precious secret in the four or five words of an anticipatory head-line? Simply because, in poignant affairs, a knowledge of essentials does not remove, but on the contrary stimulates, an interest in details.

Between these cases and that of the revisited play, a difference, in theory at least, must be admitted; in the play the spectator not only knows the issue, but has already seen the particulars. But he has grasped them, or has grasped at them, hurriedly, casually, inadequately, under the strain of a violent and engrossing preoccupation with the outcome. Mr. Archer, in an altogether different context, speaks of the letter of which one takes in "the import, almost without reading the words." A moving drama might be compared to a momentous letter of which the first reading—the read-

ing that tears the heart out of it—is careless because it is eager, and of which every syllable, almost every stroke, is sedulously conned on a second, more deliberate, perusal.

On the first night curiosity is paramount, to an extent which makes it hard to conceive that interest could survive the abstraction of this dominating factor. But the formula for the interest of the second night—assuming, for the sake of simplicity, that the visits are consecutive—is not simply: interest of the first night minus curiosity. It reads rather: interest of the first night minus curiosity plus interest (or, if you please, secondary curiosity) in a mass of detail passed by or half apprehended in the tension of the opening night. Let us figure to ourselves a group of associates dominated by a brilliant and copious talker; the observations of his companions in his presence might be merely casual and unimportant. But does it necessarily follow that, if the protagonist were called away, the ensuing conversation would sink to the incidental and trivial level of the previous forth-puttings of his interlocutors? Not in the least: the conversation of the leader had, probably enough, both stimulated and repressed the desire to speak in the minds of his associates; his withdrawal might be the signal for the emergence of new alacrities. In exactly the same way curiosity arouses secondary interests by the very conduct which precludes their immediate gratification; its recession is their opportunity. They are concerned in part with literary merits, more largely with craftsmanship, more largely still with emotional solicitations passed by or slurred over in the first eagerness of curiosity.

We pass to a group of facts illustrative of a further principle. A rustic surveys a country road with new eyes if he has once traced that road to its destination in the metropolis. A boatman watches the upper course of a stream with quickened interest if he has once followed its current to its far-off confluence with the ocean. A biologist studies the crude origins of life with heightened curiosity when he foresees their terminus in man. A boy reads with interest the commonplace opening chapters of a biography, because he knows these things to have issued in achievement. An older man reads of the humble folk-moots in Friesland or Sleswick (the head-waters of the mighty river as J. R. Green called them) or those battles of kites and crows which Milton contemptuously pushed aside with a patience sustained by

the distant but inspiring vision of a free commonwealth and a world-empire. These examples all point to the truth that a great known outcome irradiates all its antecedents, which, in turn, is part of the still wider principle that a great object glorifies its accessories. Admirable instances of the application of this truth to drama, particularly to tragedy, have been furnished by Mr. Archer himself in the references to "Othello" and "A Doll's House" quoted above; only Mr. Archer has attached to this undoubted truth a questionable theory of a satisfied thirst for omniscience on the part of a self-gratulating spectator. Our own list of examples of this anticipatory or retrospective interest—both adjectives, though formally contradictory, are in place—includes objects to which Mr. Archer's theory is clearly inapplicable—objects like a road or a river with regard to which the idea of a competition in knowledge with a triumphant spectator is unthinkable. The principle, however, can dispense with the theory.

The universal hatred of monotony is curiously qualified with a fondness for an ascertained order. Children insist on verbatim repetitions of the nursery tale, and resent the displacement of the humblest particular. The lover of good verse is scandalized by a misquotation. The slight variations in the Lord's Prayer shock ears to which they are unfamiliar. Every detail of a venerated ritual is anticipated and enjoyed by the pious. The recurrence in spring of the pasque-flowers, the Dutchman's-breeches, and the blood-root in the same spot and the same order is a pleasure which variation would disturb. The verification of forecast in the visit to the old home is a delight that cheapens novelty. The fact that variety is the only means by which the frequent repetition of unattractive processes can be made tolerable is thoroughly consistent with the principle that where objects are agreeable and repetitions rare perfect correspondence is the desideratum. Mr. Archer himself speaks aptly of the "delicate blending of surprise and realized anticipation" in the familiar play. The punctual arrival of each situation, each outcry, each jest, each metaphor, at the specified and anticipated time, the checking up of one's remembered goods and chattels, the sureness with which the inimitable Shakespeare or Ibsen or Bernard Shaw brings these wilful actors and evasive managers to time, the delightful certainty with which these caprices and vagaries

and insurgencies evolve to the foreseen and wished-for end—these things create a pleasure which unites in its fashion the charms of ordered plan and opportune coincidence.

The sum of the pleasures above cited might seem a sufficient compensation for the withdrawal of curiosity. But is it necessary to suppose that curiosity is inoperative even in a familiar play? An "acute critic" quoted by Mr. Archer thinks that curiosity of a sort may be aroused in the informed spectator through his self-identification with "the discovering persons on the stage." It seems clear that another sort of vicarious curiosity is aroused in the foreseeing spectator by his self-identification with the discovering persons in the audience. To many persons it would scarcely seem extravagant to go a step further and concede even his identification with his old self—the self that first saw or read the drama.

The contradiction between curiosity and foreknowledge as logical concepts does not apply with anything like the same force to curiosity and foreknowledge as psychological states. Logically, we cannot want to know what we do know, but the end of human nature would seem to be the discomfiture of logic. The mental tension we call curiosity is not necessarily or normally the sequel of a careful investigation and precise ascertainment of the state of our knowledge. It is an instinctive response to certain signs or symptoms of uncertainty or incompleteness in objects or actions. The justness or soundness of these intimations, the actuality, in other words, of the uncertainty or incompleteness they suggest, is a matter that we cannot always stop to determine before yielding our minds to the spell of curiosity. Now when, in real life, we see men wooing or quarreling or cheating or conspiring—the kind of actions which the stage habitually reflects—we assume that what is unsettled is uncertain. We do not stop to test this assumption. Its validity is so nearly universal that a test is superfluous. What, then, naturally occurs when the stage presents us with an action with all those marks of incompleteness which in real life justify the unhesitating assumption that the result is unknown and that curiosity is warranted? We accept the suggestion, and the tension appears in automatic response to the accustomed provocations.

But we do know the issue, avers the objector. True: but this knowledge of the outcome, though, in one sense, a per-

manent possession of the mind, is by no means a permanent occupant of consciousness. Its emergences are normally few, and, between its emergences, it is inoperative. The thought of the end will come to us in a familiar play, but its staying with us is another matter. A mind preoccupied with an engrossing spectacle cannot be expected to occupy itself in rectifying the impressions of that spectacle by perpetual recourse to a counteractive, disillusioning, and therefore for the time being, unpalatable fact lurking somewhere in the outskirts of consciousness. My memory knows that *Mercutio* is slain by *Tybalt*. But how is my memory to get credence or even audience for its impertinent allegations when my eyes and ears are dominated by a brisk interchange of thrust and counterstroke upon the stage, absorbing in its interest and obviously undecided? When I have found out whether he is slain by *Tybalt*, I shall have leisure to remember that I knew it beforehand.

In the theater where so much illusion is current, why should we chaffer over the illusion of uncertainty? If we can assume toward unreal things the attitude appropriate to reality, why cannot we assume toward known things the attitude appropriate to ignorance?

We see, then, that in a broad survey of life what has once affected us strongly usually has the power to affect us strongly again; we see that the satisfaction of the leading or initial curiosity is the needed occasion and signal for the emergence of strong secondary interests; that in many phases of life and literature alike the knowledge of a great outcome is an incalculable reinforcement of our interest in preliminaries: that a definite order becomes itself the object of a strong, even an exigent and jealous, affection; that, if we use our prerogative as human beings to throw over logic and resort to psychology, curiosity is found to co-exist with knowledge. In the light of these considerations, all of which are briefly stated or indicated by Mr. Archer himself, it hardly seems necessary to climb Olympus with that distinguished critic—alluring as such a journey would undoubtedly be with such companionship—to obtain a point of view from which the interest in known plays becomes intelligible.

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